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ABSTRACT

The author describes the phenomena of increased disturbing behaviors shown by children (6 to 12 years old) and the cost of such behaviors in terms of dollars and human misery. It is suggested that certain diseconomies exist in the traditional approach to dealing with the phenomena and that perhaps innovation is indicated. (SBH)

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Alternative Approaches to Treating Children
and Families who Exhibit Behavior Problems

Symposium 14.03 (Division E)

INTRODUCTION

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Abstract

The intention of this paper is to give a concise picture of the phenomena of increased disturbing behaviors shown by children (6 through 12 years old) and the cost of such behaviors in terms of dollars and human misery. It is suggested that certain diseconomies exist in the traditional approach to dealing with the phenomena and that perhaps innovation is indicated. The papers that follow this introduction to the symposium describe innovative alternatives to traditional methods of treating disturbing behaviors.

Alternative Approaches to Treating Children
and Families who Exhibit Behavior Problems

Introduction to Symposium 14.03 (Division E)

American Educational Research Association April, 1977.

by

Richard C. Pooley

In recent years, this country has witnessed an increase (247% in thirteen years) in disturbing behaviors shown by school children of all ages. These behaviors range from truancy and drop-out behaviors to the more serious aggressive behaviors against persons and property. It was reported that in spite of compulsory attendance laws in most states, more than two million of the nation's children are excluded from the educational process due to misbehavior of one type or another (Children's Defense Fund, 1974). Those people excluded from a total education revisit us in costly numbers. Each year, it costs this nation billions of dollars to process and maintain these people in courts and prisons, or on welfare and mental health programs, and to repair the damage (whenever possible) to persons and property left in the wake of these troubled souls. The price tag on crime and juvenile delinquency alone is 88 billion dollars per year. It is clearly a situation where the old adage "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure" must be applied. What is the ounce of prevention? It is to refine the resources in the educational arenas such that each child may receive the edu-

cation and/or other treatment he may require in order to develop into a productive human being from the beginning.

Other reports indicate that in 1975, school children with aggressive acting-out behaviors have destroyed more than 500 million dollars worth of school property across the nation - a figure equal to all the funds spent on instructional materials in one year. Furthermore, it is estimated that teachers are the victims of 70,000 physical assaults each year and that literally hundreds of thousands of students are assaulted as well. These figures were originally reported by a senate subcommittee to investigate juvenile delinquency (Senate Judiciary Committee, 1975, 1976).

In order to provide environments that sustain socially appropriate behavior, perhaps we must reorder some priorities. It has already been shown that the ability to learn is related to behavior. It has also been shown that most children who act out with disturbing behaviors do not learn as easily as their "well adjusted" counterpart. The methods to correct the situation are clearly understood. The problem is that the arenas available to deliver this service are in short supply. This nation simply does not strongly reinforce the notion of insuring healthy academic, social, and moral development of all its children. It appears that we prefer to wait until certain children commit some serious offense so he can be incarcerated rather than to prevent this outcome in the first

place. Remember, the national price tag on crime and juvenile delinquency is 88 billion dollars per year. Expenditures for public elementary and secondary education were less than 62 billion dollars last year and considerably less than that in preceding years.

I believe that the children who are not given adequate educational opportunity and social nurturing somehow understand what is happening to them. I believe they resent the social order for this negligence and they are showing their resentment in the only way they know - with aggression.

Professionals in virtually all fields of human behavior have addressed these problems in the context of scholarly research and, perhaps to a lesser degree, in action research directed toward the improvement of human service systems. These activities appear to have raised more questions than they have answered. The bodies of knowledge in education, psychology, psychiatry, sociology, corrections, and social work are replete with theoretical positions and recommendations to solve the problems of living. Why, then, are disturbing behaviors increasing rather than decreasing? One reason may be due to the abundance of conflicting information available in the behavioral sciences. We may be overwhelmed with seemingly plausible treatments that have not been proven effective in the natural environment. This information flooding may render some practitioners less efficient and somewhat confused

in their endeavors. What appears to be called for is a very practical approach to problem solving. We must sift through the available information and experiment to discover those methods that consistently work in the arenas where the problems actually exist; that is, the natural environment. It is in this context that we shall discuss the treatment of antisocial behavior in children together with some implications that are relevant to the prevention and control of problem behavior.

After treating more than 800 children and families, my colleagues and I have discovered, as others have, that a key determinant to the success of behavior treatment is the degree to which the recommendations made by the behavior analyst are carried out in the natural environment. If the recommendations are followed, then the treatment is likely to have enduring effects. If the recommendations are not followed through, then the subject is almost certain to revert to his former style. This is not to say that the recommendations must be carried out forever. It means that in order for the treatment to have enduring effects, the treatment procedures must be faded out over time. During this fading process, the subject learns to respond favorably to the natural consequences of the courses of action characterized by competence that he learned during the treatment process.

Some of the work presented in this symposium will illustrate innovative approaches to the treatment of disturbing behaviors. The success of this innovation has fostered

regional cooperation between agencies who serve a common population.

Evidence of this may be seen in the replication of the multi-agency concept for the delivery of human service to the elderly in Northern Virginia. In the past year, one project described here has received requests for information to replicate from 64 localities in 31 states and two Canadian provinces. Public interest at such a level serves to indicate that the coordinated approach to human service presented here possesses an integrity that is becoming obvious.

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